Reporting on Religion Reporting

By Dr. Mark Braun

One of the subjects I teach is Religion in America, and so one of the subjects to which my students and I must pay attention is how religion is reported by the American media—by radio and television, in newspapers, and among academics.

Most observers agree it is being covered better than it used to be. Religious features are reported more routinely, and religious issues are included in news stories more regularly today than they were in the past. The American public is comfortable with, or at least accustomed to, hearing stories about religion.

The presidential campaign offers an example. In 1928, New York governor Al Smith, the first Roman Catholic to run for president, was widely distrusted because of his Irish Catholic background. (One story circulated that Smith favored building a tunnel under the Atlantic Ocean to connect Washington to the Vatican.) The Catholic faith of John F. Kennedy still aroused concerns during the 1960 campaign. Kennedy’s clarifying statements on the separation of church and state, particularly in a speech before the Houston Ministerial Association on September 12, 1960, alleviated the concern sufficiently that he won the election. By the 1980s, the Catholicism of would-be candidate Mario Cuomo was seldom raised as reason for distrust, and in 2004 John Kerry faces greater risk of being considered not Catholic enough by the local bishop or his parish priest than too Catholic by the press or the American public.

In the May/June 2004 issue of the Columbia Journalism Review, Gal Beckerman posed the question, “Why Don’t Journalists Get Religion? A Tenuous Bridge to Believers.” As Beckerman conceded, “Religion writing has come a long way during the past decades.” Ann Rodgers-Melnick, religion reporter for the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, remembered that when she began her career 24 years ago, the religion beat was considered “a real do-nothing kind of job, writing about chicken suppers and maybe a cute profile about an ice-skating nun.” Newspaper coverage of religion often served as little more than “an anchor on Saturdays for church advertising.”

Today many newspapers dispatch at least one or two religion writers to devote primary attention to religious stories. The Dallas Morning News features a weekly six-page religion section and a team of four reporters covering various aspects of belief and practice. Journalists assigned the religion beat are more likely to come to their positions with theological training from seminaries or divinity schools. A September 5 New York Times article reported that the study of religion flourishes on some state university campuses, not just at Bible colleges or in graduate schools of theology. Christian Smith, in an article entitled “Hostility and Condescension Toward Religion in the University,” noted many evidences of increased interest in the academic study of religion:

X new courses on religion and politics, development, and culture are “popping up here and there”;
X newly proposed programs on Islamic and Jewish studies generate faculty discussion;
X top university presses are expanding their published titles on religion;
X recently funded research initiatives focus on forgiveness, spiritual progress, and public religion;
X more new teaching jobs in the sociology of religion are being offered at respected colleges and universities.

Martin Marty, who referenced Beckerman’s Columbia article in his August 9 Sightings from the Marty Center at the University of Chicago, commented that during a lecture at the Aspen Institute in July
he “littered the stage with clippings from four newspapers from seven days” to demonstrate that “explicit references to religion appeared in headlines by the dozens.” Long-time reporters on the subject are mystified to hear complaints that religion coverage is down. As he sees it, it’s up.

Things may be even better than usually lamented. Beckerman repeated the old gripe that Evangelicals do not get fair treatment among journalists, a charge Marty dismissed. “Once upon a time, they did not,” and, true, “some journalists cannot resist writing about the bizarre and egregious.” But overall, Evangelicals get more positive stories than do mainline denominations, which are faulted “for not being able to overcome factions or faddishness.”

Still, Beckerman cited key reasons why religion reporting doesn’t get its due. One is sheer lack of reporting manpower. “Editors and owners simply do not make religion a priority, and journalists are not encouraged to make it a part of their stories.” Religion writers can barely keep up with the hard news of religious institutions, let alone address deeper, more subtle questions of faith. Comparing her religion beat to the resources devoted to politics, Laurie Goldstein, formerly at The Washington Post and currently at The New York Times, said, “They have a Washington bureau full of political reporters. So, one is going to write the analysis, one will do the profile, and then there is an editor to pick out the excerpts to run in the box. But for religion, there’s me.”

Another obstacle to good religion reporting is that journalists are viewed as and admit to being overwhelmingly secular in their world view. Beckerman writes, “They cannot appreciate or understand the world as religious people see it.” This notion is perpetuated by the now-more-than-two-decades-old Lichter-Rothman survey that found that 86 percent of so-called “media elite” rarely or never attend religious meetings and that 50 percent claim no religious affiliation at all. “There is a chasm between people that work at The Washington Post and The New York Times and people like us,” wrote Robert Case II, an evangelical Christian who runs the World Journalism Institute, a school with the stated objective to “recruit, train, place, and encourage Christians in the mainstream newsrooms of America.” Religious people “think that if someone from The New York Times lived next door to us they might eat our children. And they would think the same thing about us.”

Closely related to the charge that journalists possess a different worldview than religious readers is the accusation that journalists simply do not know enough about religion to report on it intelligently. It is hard to imagine any newspaper editor assigning the local high school football beat to a fresh journalism grad who hates sports. Yet editors seem resigned to delegating religion stories to young reporters who were not raised in the church, or who were but are now estranged from it, whose familiarity with religious hymnody fails to go beyond Adam Sandler’s “Hanukkah Song,” and who may consider religion at best a harmless diversion, at worst a menace to modern life.

These need not be new journalists. A veteran columnist for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, who professes to be a church-going Catholic, seldom misses an opportunity to lampoon his church body or to demand that it abandon what he considers its archaic teachings and erratic practices. Repeatedly he reveals his ignorance, if not utter contempt, for the history and tradition of his denomination, deciding every issue by the single criterion of how he thinks things should be improved. Regarding what other area of the news would a major metropolitan newspaper tolerate such shallow and uninformed “reporting”?

The ailment appears widespread. Christian Smith, cited earlier, professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina and author of Christian America? What Evangelicals Really Want, rebuked most religion writers recently for being “ignorant about religion.” In trying to understand why religion stories so often fall into a handful of simplistic categories—“fundamentalism, violence, scandals, homophobia, dying churches, repression, exotic rituals, political ambition, cults, trivia”—Smith fixed blame on a deplorable lack of information on the part of the “secular knowledge class.” Religion writers he speaks to, Smith claimed, often don’t even know the proper names of the denominations they cover, let alone appreciate their basic tenets: “I find it hard to believe that
political journalists call Washington think tanks to talk with experts on background about the political strategies of the 'Democratizer' or 'Republication' parties, or about the most recent 'Supremacist Court' ruling."

Remember Smith the next time you see this church body referred to as “the Wisconsin Senate,” which, as we know, is one of those “Luthran” or “Luthern” groups founded by Martin Luther King.

Ironically, while ESPN keeps tapping former athletes for its swelling stable of sports anchors (because “they played the game”), and while former politicians, district attorneys, and military leaders are regularly featured as “insider commentators,” it is frequently argued that non-churchgoers, even nonbelievers, can do a better job at religion reporting and in religious studies because they bring impartiality. One of the great surprises in the transition from parish pastor to college professor came when I began to attend professional religious meetings rather than local pastors’ conference. (I still try to go to pastors’ conferences when I can, but scheduling is difficult.) The annual meetings of, say, the Society of Biblical Literature or the American Academy of Religion feature dozens of concurrent sessions devoted to biblical interpretation, textual criticism, doctrinal formulations, historical developments, archaeological insights, and many others, yet the crowded meeting programs feature few if any opportunities for worship. (A walking tour of historic religious sites often is offered, allowing us to see the empty buildings or former locations of outstanding religious activities but seldom anything that actually goes on there.) As these religious studies scholars ride the elevators at major downtown hotels while attending their annual meetings, they bump into doctors or undertakers or insurance agents, also attending their national meetings. “What religion are you?” these scholars are asked, or they are teased, “Uh-oh, we’d better behave. We’re at the same hotel with you religious types.” To which the scholars reply, “We’re not religious. We study religion. We don’t behave. We’re profane too. Which way is the bar?”

While some who study religion academically come to their disciplines with little church background, others trace their more-secular-than-thou attitudes back to their once-religious childhoods. They may be dealing with what John Dewey called his religious upbringing: a “laceration,” old wounds. Or they may have grown embarrassed at the narrowness or the provincialism of their growing-up years. They may equate their spiritual formation at St. John Lutheran or St. Theresa Catholic as symbolic of everything “nice,” boring, and repressed, from which they were liberated when they went off to college. I once eavesdropped on a sidewalk café conversation in Toronto involving a half dozen attendees of the Templeton Conference on Science and Religion, the topic of which was “when I lost my faith.”

Beckerman suggests more reasons for the poor reporting of religion, one of which merits consideration. The journalism-religion antagonism often plays out with religious belief being “shoved into political categories.” Journalists “tend to see the world through a political prism in which there are often only two sides, conservative and liberal, and religion is seen as a function of these two categories.” Thus journalists may care only whether religious groups are for or against a particular item, while “the internal theological debates or the religious logic that leads a group to support or oppose a particular issue is often ignored,” as are “the many shades of difference between a religion’s official position and what its practitioners actually believe.”

Beckerman’s thesis finds support in how abortion, gay marriage, homosexuality, stem cell research, and even Mel Gibson’s movie The Passion of the Christ are often discussed. This tendency leads to the prevalence of conflict stories, reducing every religious issue to a two-sided argument. Not everyone, however, considers this a bad thing. Mark Silk, professor of religion at Trinity College and author of Unsecular Media: Making News in Religious America, thinks conflict stories are what work best, even when they minimize nuances in belief or practice. “Journalists do well at going places and finding what people are struggling with. It’s what journalism is.”
But in seeing religious stories only in terms of conflict, are not journalists missing most of what millions of Americans value who do believe and live their faith? I once asked Tom Heinen, religion editor of the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, why it is that 100,000,000 Americans attending church on a given Sunday morning isn’t news, but if 30 Gaia worshipers dance naked along the lakefront at sunrise, it is. Heinen replied that my answer was in my question: It’s not news. “When the day comes that 100,000,000 Gaia worshipers dance naked along the lakefront at sunrise,” he said, “and when 30 Americans go to church on a Sunday morning, then going to church will be news.”

Maybe most of what goes on in our churches isn’t newsworthy because it doesn’t involve conflict and because it happens all the time. We may say we wish we could hear and read more feature stories about the good things that are happening in religion, but, as Marty observed, “Ask yourself, do you and will you read news stories about the pacific and humdrum life of people most days in most synagogues and churches, including your own? If you receive a suburban newspaper which runs scores of articles about the daily and weekly doings of nearby churches and synagogues, ask yourself again: do I read these stories? Do I want to?” Other than checking whether the paper got my information about my church event right, probably not. Perhaps we need to recognize, Marty concluded, “It is conflict, not piety, that makes news.”

Psalm verses sung by the student congregation in a recent morning chapel service reminded us:

How good and pleasant it is  
when brothers to live together in unity! (Psalm 133:1)
Praise the LORD, all you servants 
of the LORD 
who minister by night 
in the house of the LORD.
Lift up your hands in the sanctuary 
and praise the LORD.  
(Psalm 134:1-2)

A nearby psalm urges:

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
“May those who love you be secure.”
May there be peace within your walls 
and security within your citadels.
For the sake of my brothers and friends, 
I will say, “Peace be within you.”  
(Psalm 122:6-8)

The collect of the historic Vespers service includes the line, “Defend us from the fear of our enemies that we may live in peace and quietness.” I remember thinking how boring that prayer sounded to me when I was a college student, but it becomes more reassuring as one grows older. Peace and quietness, safety within Jerusalem’s walls, brothers and sisters living together in unity, grateful worship in evening solitude—such things will never make the news. But peaceful, quiet times are undoubtedly the most suitable circumstances for doing what most marks us as Christians: speaking words of comfort and encouragement, loving and serving others above ourselves, receiving grace and forgiveness through the Sacrament, bringing requests and praises to the Father’s throne.

If living in God’s good news doesn’t make news, maybe it’s just as well.